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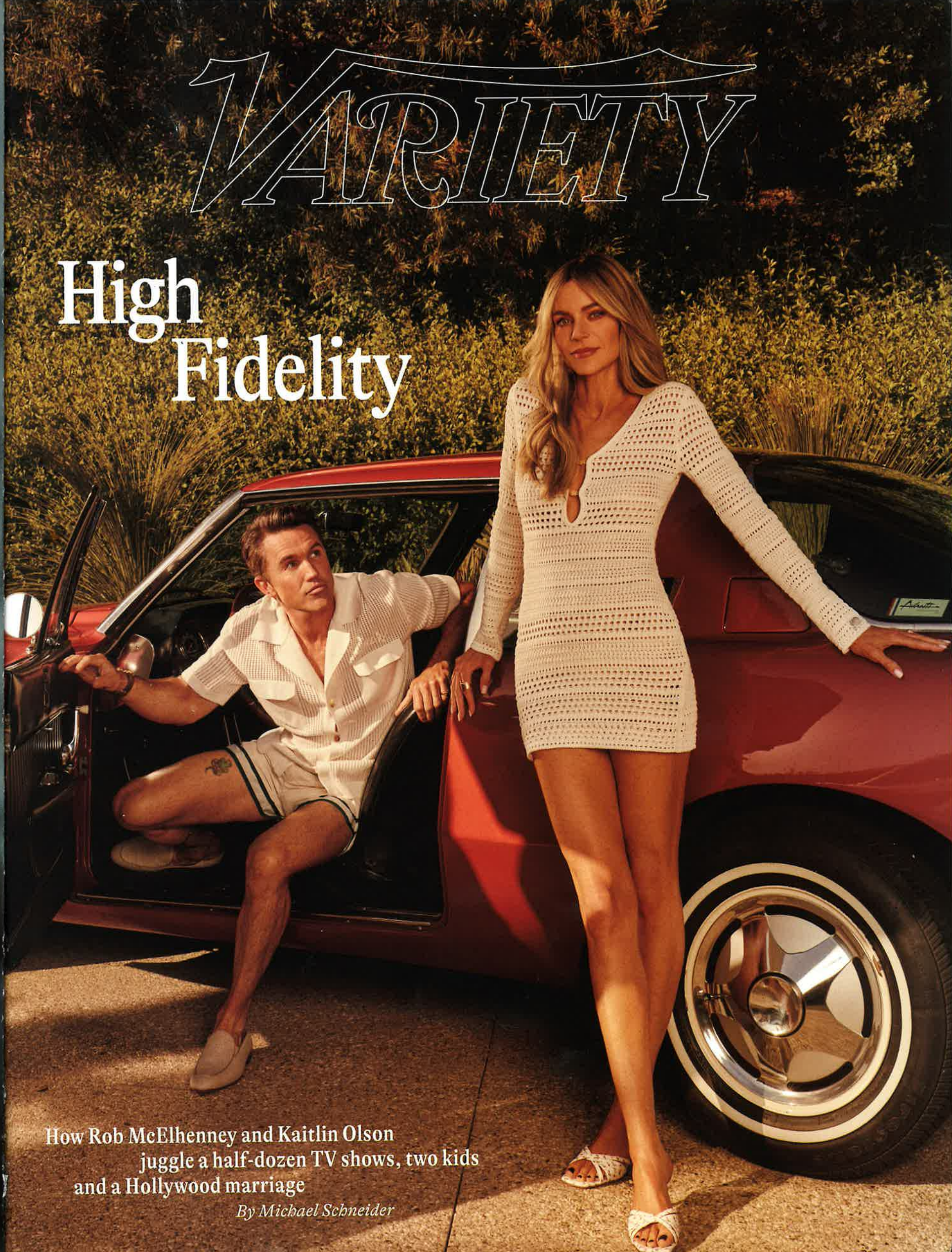

How Rob McElhenney and Kaitlin Olson juggle a half-dozen TV shows, two kids and a Hollywood marriage

By Michael Schneider

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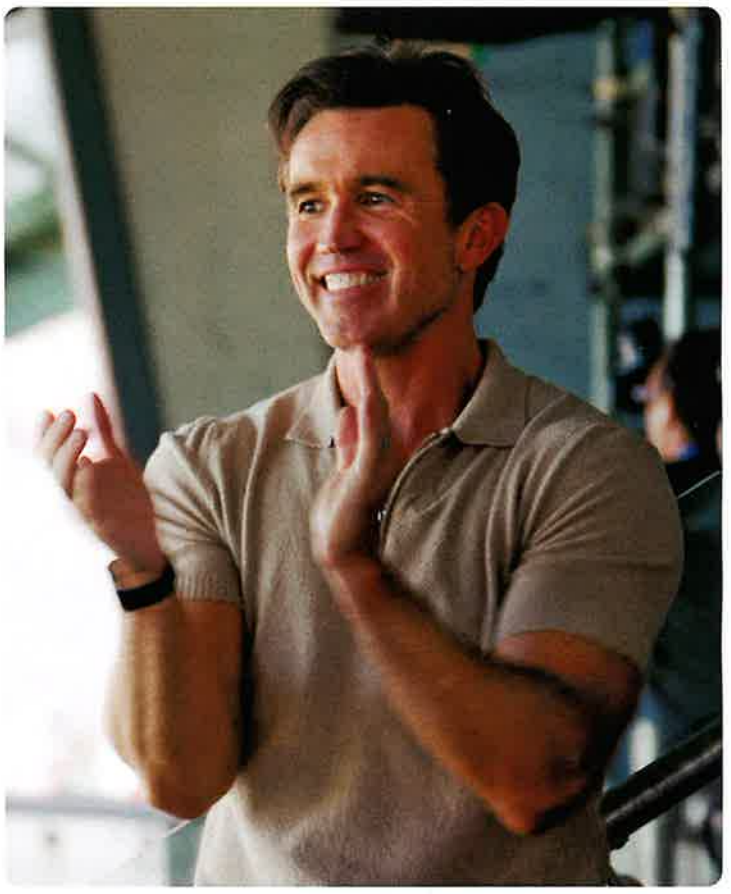


Kaitlin Olson produces and stars in "High Potential"; Rob McElhenny created the docuseries "Welcome to Wrexham" with Ryan Reynolds

Scenes from a Marriage That Works

→ Stiller and Meara. Burns and Allen. Ozzie and Harriet. Lucy and Desi. And now, Rob McElhenney and Kaitlin Olson, aka Mac and Sweet Dee of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" fame.

Our cover-story subjects, who met 20 years ago on their signature FX series, have joined the pantheon of TV comedy greats who happen to be married. We've wanted to tell the story of one of Hollywood's power couples for some time. And now is definitely that time, because the pair are on fire professionally, together and separately.

Olson is juggling no less than three series (ABC's "High Potential," Max's "Hacks" and "It's Always Sunny"), while McElhenney steers FX's "It's Always Sunny" and "Welcome to Wrexham," the latter in partnership with Ryan Reynolds. What's more, McElhenney is diving into other business ventures through his newly formed More Better Productions banner.

But the most profound part of this story goes beyond their professional success: McElhenney and Olson give our Michael Schneider a glimpse of what it's like to be multi-hyphenates at the top of their game and also be a married couple who are listed on the daily call sheet of life as "Dad" and "Mom" to teenage sons Axel and Leo. The pair speak with remarkable candor about the hard work of maintaining their relationship and their family ties. They have a level of faith in each other that is inspiring.

From the sublime to the semi-ridiculous, this issue also features a full report on the television upfronts, complete with letter grades for each platform. *Variety*'s Team TV was all over the May 12-14 marathon of glitzy programming presentations from Disney, Netflix, Amazon, NBCUniversal and others. We zero in on the buzziest trends, shows and stars to emerge from a busy 72 hours of ballyhoo.

Finally, our Tatiana Siegel catches up with Zachary Levi from "Shazam!" The actor went out on a limb, careerwise, last year in endorsing Donald Trump for president. He explains how he would advise people who are afraid to expose themselves as being sympathetic to the MAGA movement. "Listen, you're on your journey; I'm on my journey," he would tell them. "You've got to keep trusting God. And if you feel compelled to step out in that way, then do it boldly and know that you're going to be OK. And if you don't feel that conviction yet, then don't. It's all good."

CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Cynthia Littleton Ramin Setoodeh

Photos: ABC; McElhenney: FX; Littleton: Photograph by Dan Doperalski; Setoodeh: Photograph by Alexi Lubomirski

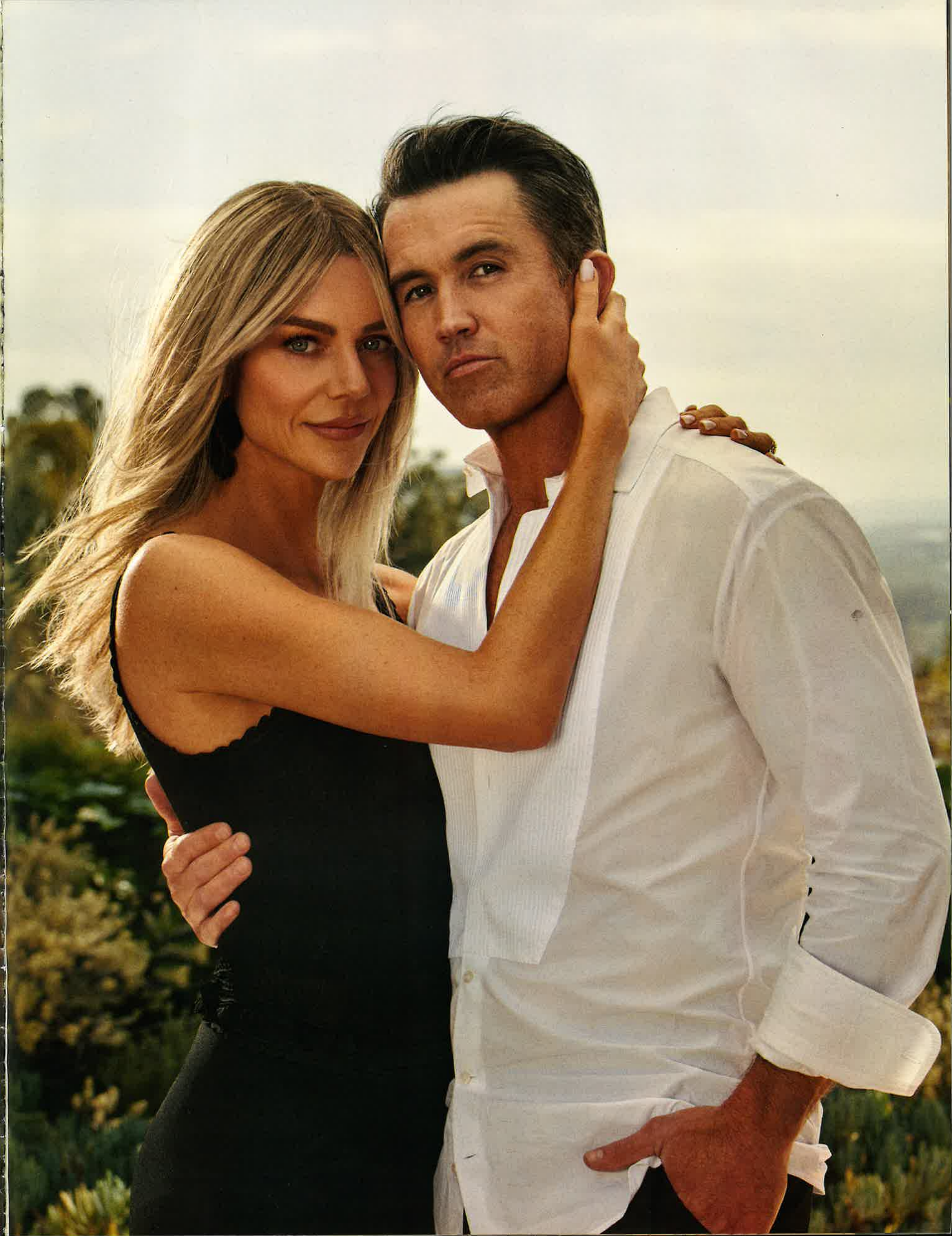
Sunny Days

Kaitlin Olson and Rob McElhenney,

the power couple who met 20 years ago on 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia,' are hitting their stride as producers

By **Michael Schneider**

Photographs by **Nino Muñoz**



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Rob McElhenney was visiting a stunning new West Hollywood hotel recently to speak at a conference, and started snapping photographs of the place on his cellphone. "I took a bunch of pictures because I was like, 'Kaitlin would love this. It's right up her alley. And wouldn't it be nice to just go and have a little staycation here, if only for one night?'" • It's a sweet gesture for a husband to be thinking about planning a quick getaway with his wife of nearly 17 years. And it illustrates the endurance of the relationship behind what may now be the most powerful couple on television. • Days later, McElhenney is recounting this tale while seated in his West L.A. offices. Next to him on a plush couch is Olson (and Ryan Reynolds, in the form of a cardboard cutout, hovering above them), who affirms how they continue to make it work — even with two kids, McElhenney and Reynolds' growing Wrexham football empire and Olson's new hit TV show, "High Potential." • "Yeah, we still like each other," Olson says.

The two first met when he cast her to play Sweet Dee on FX's comedy "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia" back in 2005, and now their teens are old enough to binge it.

McElhenney then launches into a story: "Our 15-year-old was just watching 'Sunny' the other night ..."

"He's 14," Olson says.

"He's almost 15!" McElhenney shoots back. "But he was watching 'Sunny' Season 1 the other night, and we started watching with him. And we look like little kids! We're different people — so different from the characters, but also so different from then. We've been together for so long and then created this person who's now watching this version of us. It's a very surreal experience."

Those young versions of McElhenney and Olson couldn't have imagined where they might end up. Twenty years later, they're quite the stimulus package, having just given a jolt to two businesses that desperately needed it. And if "stimulus" and "package" both sound a little dirty, well, I'm sure after 17 seasons of salty "Sunny" humor they can appreciate the double entendre.

"It would be very impressive if just one of them was going on a run, but the fact is that both of them are stringing together a series of real successes," says "Sunny" co-star and exec producer Charlie Day. "They're on a tear."

For starters, Olson is a major reason broadcast TV is enjoying a resurgence this season. ABC's "High Potential" is a smash hit — one of the biggest shows on TV right now — pumping new blood into network TV after cable and streaming pilfered primetime's pulse.

Meanwhile, across the pond, McElhenney and Reynolds have taken the also-ran Wrexham football club and won three English Football League promotions. Last month, the club won a shocker that sent it to the Championship level — now it's one step away from the vaunted Premier League.

Olson, too, is a recurring guest star on Max's "Hacks," earning two consecutive Emmy nominations for playing the daughter of Deborah Vance (Jean Smart) and helping that show secure an outstanding comedy win. ("She's so talented, so exceptional," Smart says. "And it's so overdue, the attention she's getting now. I loved her from the day I met her.") Speaking of Emmys, McElhenney has won two for FX's unscripted series "Welcome to Wrexham," which chronicles his and Reynolds' journey after buying the team.

And don't forget: The long-running "Sunny"— which McElhenney showruns, and where the couple first fell in love — returns in July for its 17th season, already a record duration for a scripted live-action sitcom.

They're also in business together as investors in the Philly bar Mac's Tavern — named after McElhenney's character on "Sunny," but also a nickname that he has started to embrace. (More on that in a moment.)

"This is a guy who just wants to do something — or sees that something needs to be done — and then just figures out how to do it," says FX boss John Landgraf. "If he decides, 'I want to buy an old soccer team in the U.K. with Ryan Reynolds,' they go out and find a team. Now, the king of England and the prince of Wales are coming to the place. That's magic."

Says "Sunny" co-star and executive producer Glenn Howerton: "Rob tends to succeed. He's a very smart, humble and collaborative person, and I'm extremely proud of him. And Kaitlin, I don't know how she does it. I mean, she's on three different TV shows. What the fuck is going on, man? If I wanted to do what those two were doing, there'd probably be part of me that was jealous. But it all sounds very exhausting. I'm too damn lazy to do all that shit. It's just too much!"

Co-star Danny DeVito adds that he feels like a proud dad. "He's an impressive guy," DeVito says of McElhenney. "And I've always thought that Kaitlin was the funniest one on the show. She's not only gorgeous, but has the timing and is a natural comedian."

Keeping things in the "Sunny" family, McElhenney's side company, More Better Productions, now includes Four Walls Whiskey, which he launched with Day and Howerton. And in co-owning Wrexham, he's grown quite close to Reynolds: He grabs his phone to show how often the two exchange joke videos throughout the day (it's a lot) in between discussing how to grow their football empire. Their bond means that McElhenney and Olson have made a point of lending their support to Reynolds and his wife, Blake Lively, during their public legal battle with "It Ends With Us" director Justin Baldoni,.

"It's just our way of staying connected and navigating something together," McElhenney says. "And also me giving and showing as much support as I possibly can with all the other stuff that he's got going on, that I know is so difficult and challenging. We both are just trying to offer our support in any way that we can that doesn't just simply add oxygen to the fire."

Reynolds also has his pal's back, creating an entire music video last year for McElhenney's birthday as a pronunciation primer on how to say that last name. (It really is quite simple: "Mackle-Henney.")

But as More Better Productions has upped its global investments, including soccer teams in Colombia and Mexico, McElhenney has found that his last name is a constant source of confusion. He tells me that he's even pondering a name change: "As our business and our storytelling is expanding into other regions of the world and other languages in which my name is even harder to pronounce, I'm just going by Rob Mac," he says.

Olson and family are still getting used to the idea: "The kids are really not happy about it, because they have that last name," Olson says. "And so do I, legally!"

The McElhenney-Olson union almost didn't happen. "Sunny" was famously born out of a low-budget project that McElhenney, Day and Howerton came up with after getting to know each other on the young actor circuit. Ironically, McElhenney was least excited about casting Olson.

It's a story that McElhenney and Olson now have down pat. For her audition, Olson read with Day while McElhenney was directing. At one point,

"The truth is that marriage is really fucking hard. We have gone through terrible times, and we have gone through wonderful times. We've hit heights that I couldn't possibly imagine that I would meet with a partner."

Rob McElhenney

she was asked to put down the sides and improvise. "I let go of the already funny stuff and concentrated on leveling up the rest of the material," Olson recalls. "After, I called my manager and said, 'The audition was great. I want this job. But I'm so pissed that I left out the funniest line that was already in there, because I was so focused on just making everything bounce better.'"

Guess who wrote that killer line that Olson omitted. "So she leaves the room, we're no doubt 100% thinking she was awesome," McElhenney remembers. "But I don't know if her instincts were 100% right, because she left out the funniest line. Now, is it a coincidence that I happened to write that line? I was 26 years old, and probably very precious with what I was writing."

Thankfully, McElhenney's producing partner Nick Frenkel was there to set him straight — as was everyone else, including Landgraf. "He caved and settled," Olson jokes of McElhenney's initial reluctance. "And then I passed on the project."

That's right — after all that, Olson discovered she wasn't reading lines that were meant for her character, Sweet Dee. "When they offered me the part, I asked for four scripts," she says. "And I was shocked, because they didn't have anything funny for Sweet Dee." Instead of the rude, deliciously inappropriate character she was excited to play, that early version of Dee was more of a nag — while the three guys got to do all the fun, offensive stuff.

After Olson said no, McElhenney called her to see what was up and hear her gripes. He explained that with their shoestring budget, they hadn't been able to write new scripts to reflect where they wanted to go with Dee, but promised that the character would evolve into something more improper. Olson gave in and joined the show.

That first year's budget was so lean that even while showrunning "Sunny," McElhenney didn't quit his gig as a waiter. Why would he? "Sunny" was paying him $7,500 an episode, which after taxes and commission wasn't huge — and there was no guarantee it would last beyond the first seven episodes.

"That was our chance, and we're very proud of those episodes," McElhenney says. "It was certainly unlike anything else on TV. We knew we were betting on ourselves. John was very up front with us and saying, 'We're taking a risk on you. You came in and said you want to be the showrunner. You're not even the head waiter at a restaurant! But I believe in you.'"

On a personal level, it was around year two of "Sunny" that things started moving in a new direction for McElhenney and Olson. What began as a bit of flirtation became undeniable. "I was very impressed with this guy who wrote this thing, who was a waiter, just how well he ran our television show," Olson says. "He looked like he was about 14 years old, and he just was like this little boy who just knew what he was doing. He was so smart; he was so funny; he was great at collaborating. He was not my type at all, and I was falling in love with him. And, um, he didn't feel the same way."

Retorts McElhenney: "I was professional!"

But it all came to a head at the wedding of Day and Mary Elizabeth Ellis, who plays the Waitress (the object of unrequited affection for Day's character, also named Charlie) on "Sunny." After that weekend, it was undeniable.

"I was finding myself on set, being in love with someone secretly, and thinking, 'This is bad,'" Olson says. "I wasn't just attracted to him anymore. I quickly fell very hard in love with him."

Soon they were dating, but their co-workers had no idea. That included Howerton, who was living with McElhenney at the time. "How did I not see this was happening?" Howerton recalls. "She would always come over and then would get too drunk and sleep there. In retrospect, she wasn't really that drunk; she was just using that as an excuse to stay at our apartment. And then Rob would disappear for a couple of nights, and I'd be like, 'What's going on?' He'd tell me he went out with some girl, just making shit up!"

DeVito says he could sense something was up: "When we were going on a trip or something like that, you got the feeling that they were kind of gravitating toward each other in a cool way," he says. "Every once in a while, people who are supposed to be together wind up together."

Eventually, McElhenney and Olson had to come clean to their co-stars and the network. "I had zero suspicion," Day says. "I didn't see it coming at all. And conversely, didn't care one way or the other. Maybe because Mary Elizabeth and I had been together for so long at that point, I thought, 'Well, what's the big deal?' I think I remember Glenn was a little more thrown off."

That would be correct. Howerton still remembers how he was scooping their two cats' kitty litter box when McElhenney dropped that bombshell. "I thought he was doing a bit, because he knows that the stupidest thing you could possibly do is to date your co-star," Howerton says. "You're compromising the show and everybody's job. If that goes south, you're fucked, and your whole show is fucked, and you fucked everybody. So I laughed, and he was like, 'No, I'm serious. We both tried to stop it, but we're in love.'

"All of this is happening while I've got a fucking cat pooper-scooper in my hand. I was like, 'You idiot! You've got to be fucking kidding me. You know this is the stupidest possible thing you could be doing, right?'"

Landgraf was similarly alarmed. "I remember thinking, 'Uh-oh!' I wasn't thinking the show would go 17 or 18 seasons back then, but I thought the odds of it going to five seasons had just gone down," he says. "They're two incredibly funny, very attractive people. So I guess it didn't surprise me all that much, and I'm so glad it worked out."

The couple married in 2008 and had their first son, Axel, in 2010, followed by second son Leo in 2012. McElhenney and Olson are very aware of how lucky they were to be shooting "Sunny" in L.A., allowing plenty of work-life balance when their kids were young.

The couple early on decided on a "two-week rule," meaning that two weeks is how long they can be away from home on a job. "I think that's really important," Olson notes. McElhenney says the couple also has a pact where even if both parents are working, the kids get one of them at either breakfast, school

"I'm really proud of us for making our marriage important and a priority.

When we are stuck, I have a therapist and he has a therapist.

If there's a time we need help, we go get the help, and then we move on."

Kaitlin Olson

Glenn Howerton, Rob McElhenney, Kaitlin Olson, Danny DeVito and Charlie Day in Season 1 of "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia"

Styling: Ilaria Urbinati/The Wall Group. Makeup: Kara Yoshimoto Bua/A Frame Agency; Hair: Abby Roll and April Schuller. First spread: On Rob: Tuxedo shirt: Dolce and Gabbana; Trousers: Fendi; On Kaitlyn: Top and pants: Sandro Paris; Earrings: Saule. Everett Collection

drop, dinner or bedtime. "You might not be getting both, but you're getting one or the other," he says. "We're always making sure that no matter how busy we get, the messaging to the children is that they're our No. 1 priority."

But as the kids have gotten older, they've also become more aware of their parents' fame. "Axel is obsessed with 'Sunny,'" Olson notes. "He's watching it every single night, and there's no stopping him. So we watch it together a lot, and I do way too much pausing and explanation. Satire is tricky!"

What's even tricker: The McElhenney-Olson kids are starting to show interest in following their parents by appearing on camera. That's causing a bit of angst in the household, particularly after the boys — who have mostly been kept out of the spotlight — were seen on "Welcome to Wrexham."

"We'd talked about not showing their faces," Olson says. "I remember going through puberty — no kid should be seen publicly before they're ready to. And it's not their fault that we're famous. Rob went rogue and put them in a fucking documentary! I'm still unhappy about that."

"The kids love it," McElhenney says. "I have a different perspective. Millions of people across the world say, 'We love to watch them!'"

Olson says, "I don't care about them — I care about my kids! We're still fighting about it."

It's a refreshingly unguarded moment, maybe because I've been interviewing them since the start of "Sunny" in 2005. But it's also indicative of the message the two of them want to share with fans: that despite the glossy photos that accompany this feature, McElhenney and Olson are a very real couple who are proud of how vigorously they aim to make their relationship work.

"The confluence of hair, makeup, lighting, photography, the clothing, they make us look incredible," McElhenney says. "And that's a testament to the craftsmanship and the narrative. But the truth is that marriage is really fucking hard. We've gone through terrible times, and we've gone through wonderful times. We've hit seemingly rock bottom, and we've hit heights that I couldn't possibly imagine that I would meet with a partner. I'd like to believe that we're going to continue that for the next 40, 50, 60 years together."

A big breakthrough in their relationship came a few years ago when McElhenney was belatedly diagnosed with a neurodivergence, including ADHD. "It answered a lot of questions for me that I've always had about my life and the trajectory of my life, and how unsuccessful I was at so many things for so long, like school. I was a terrible student," he says, noting that he didn't go to college as a result.

"I had a lot of love and support, but there was also a lot of assumptions that I was lazy because I was stubborn," he says.

For Olson, it solved an issue they had in their marriage: "I loved it, because the neuro psych called me and had a long discussion with me and was asking me all these questions. Rob's an amazing person and my best friend and my life partner, and he's the best. He's also really hard to live with sometimes, and it was nice to have some answers. Looking back, even when we were dating, there would be times where I'd be like, 'That's fucking weird. What is this thing that's going on?' It gives me the language to ask questions and open up a conversation, and now we can talk about that stuff, and I don't just quietly go assume that he's being disrespectful, because he's not."

Olson and McElhenney credit therapy for giving them the words they need to work through it all, especially because they realized that Olson comes from an empathetic angle and McElhenney is often approaching things from an analytical perspective, leading to a difference in outlook.

"I'm really proud of us for making our marriage important and a priority," Olson says. "When we're stuck, I have a therapist and he has a therapist. I'm really happy about the fact that I'm married to someone who doesn't have a negative association with therapy. If there's a time we need help, we go get the help, and then we move on."

As their kids grow up, McElhenney and Olson are pondering what life will be like once they're empty nesters and have more time to go on walks together and pursue other shared interests. But for now, they're savoring those twilight family moments at their home on the Westside, where their property even has a creek like the one Olson grew up near in Oregon.

"My favorite time of day, especially right now, is eating dinner together," Olson says. "We all jump on the trampoline after, and then we all go watch a show. It's the best." McElhenney adds, "If I could be anywhere in the world right now, it would be at home." ●